

Handling Social Rejection, Mistakes, and Setbacks

An obstacle that prevents many people improving their social skills and going after the life they want is that they fear rejection. They fear being embarrassed in the process of getting turned down. They fear getting the message that they're not good enough. They fear having to feel worse about themselves. They fear making a mistake or experiencing a setback that will bring about those feelings of discouragement and unworthiness.

It's something that everyone needs to work on. If you remain too afraid of rejection your life will stagnate. Too many of the things you need to do to improve your social success have an element of risk to them. Starting conversations with people, expressing your opinions, and inviting people to hang out are just a few.

This won't be some unrealistic article that will try to tell you that rejection and mistakes are no big deal and that you can learn to completely get over them. It hurts to be rejected or suffer a setback. We all get nervous when we have to take a social risk. No one is totally able not to care. However, some people are much better able to handle rejection than others. They can bounce back from it quicker, are able to frame it more constructively, and don't let it affect their self-image as much.

This article will cover three sub-topics:

- How you'll naturally become more able to handle rejection as you have more success
- Dealing with your fear of rejection
- Ways to recover from a rejection once one happens to you

Traits of people who aren't great at dealing with rejection

People who have a hard time with social rejection tend to have a lot of the following apply to them:

- They haven't had much objective social success yet.
- They've decided their self-esteem hinges on becoming more socially successful. Every rejection, mistake, or setback rocks them to the core and makes them feel flawed and unworthy.
- They feel they've already been rejected many times in the past, and think they can't take much more.
- They feel all rejection is horrible, and that ideally they shouldn't ever be rejected by anybody. They feel they have to make everyone they meet like and accept them.
- They feel like getting rejected or making a gaffe will be really embarrassing and painful in the moment it happens.
- They think their rejections will haunt them forever and hinder their future efforts. They think they'll be humiliated in the moment, everyone will know what happened, and that they'll never be able to live it down.
- They have a scarcity mentality. They think social opportunities are rare, and that if they blow a chance they've really set themselves back.
- They think one or a handful of rejections are a sign that their situation is hopeless and they should give up.

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- They may get resentful and bitter the more they're rejected, and overgeneralize and develop a negative attitude towards the entire category of people they see as having shunned them ("A handful of particular artists don't want to hang out with me" vs. "All artists don't want to be with me.") They may develop an attitude of, "Well, I don't really want to be friends with them after all" as a defense mechanism.
- Additionally, some people may be hardwired to be more sensitive to rejection.

As you have more social success and gain experience with rejection, your attitude to it will tend to change

People who have an easier time with rejection fit the description below. Their resistance to rejection comes from them actually having had some real-world success:

- They're not totally immune to the sting of rejection. They may still hesitate to face it, and they may still feel down if someone isn't interested in them. Their confidence and comfort with facing rejection will still have its ups and downs. However, overall they have more internal resources for dealing with it.
- They're not necessarily the world's most popular people, but they've had success in the social world. They have friends. They know they're well-liked by at least some people. They've received direct evidence that they're not irreparably flawed. They 'know' they're worthy and feel they no longer have anything to prove. If someone rejects them they've had the life experience where they can truly think, "Whatever, I've already had friends who are way better than this person. I'm not going to lose sleep over them not wanting to hang out."
- They've been rejected and made mistakes before many times and have seen firsthand that they can survive it, and that it doesn't ultimately get in the way of their having the social life they want. Past experience has told them that if they keep at it, they'll hit their goals eventually.
- They have an abundance mentality. If one group or person turns them down, they can truly say they've got other prospects or existing friends to fall back on.

Constructive attitudes towards rejection and slip ups

People who handle rejection better also develop more healthy attitudes towards it. These also tend to come about as a side effect of their positive experiences. The typical productive attitudes are:

- They know when someone doesn't want to talk to them or hang out it's often not a true rejection at all. The person was just distracted or had other plans, and has nothing against them as a person.
- When they are rejected for real, they know it's not always a reflection on them and may be because the other person was having a bad day.
- They know they can't be a good match for everyone they meet.
- They know that rejection is just part of the process of trying to do things like form a social life. They realize making friends is partially a numbers game. They think long term, and focus on what their end goal is, rather than worrying how any one interaction plays out.

- They realize everyone gets rejected at times, even self-assured, good looking people who seem to have it easy.
- They realize that trying to avoid all rejection would mean embracing a safe, boring, people-pleasing life.
- They see rejected as a way to screen out people who wouldn't have been a good match for them anyway. They almost see getting rejected by someone as a favor, since they've been given a clear message that they should put their energy into pursuing other prospects.
- They realize some rejections are a good thing, like if a bigot rejects them for being non-prejudiced.
- They realize no one else cares all that much if they get rejected. They may even admire them for having the guts to risk going for what they want.
- They see every 'no' as one step forward towards them getting a 'yes'.
- They see rejection as an opportunity to gain feedback and learn from their mistakes.

Getting past the Catch-22

I totally realize the Catch-22 inherent in what I've described above: To get to a point where a fear of rejection doesn't hinder your having social success... you have to already have had some social success. Yeah, really actionable advice there. Here are my thoughts on how you can bridge the gap:

Get that first little taste of success and let things snowball from there

The good thing about having the mentality where you're good at facing rejection is that once it takes hold it tends to build on itself. It subjectively feels better to have, and it propels you towards even more success in the future, which reinforces your new attitudes further. Don't base your self-esteem on whether you can become the most popular, charismatic person in the world overnight. If you can get some small, achievable amount of social success, that will build your confidence and give you the momentum to make bigger gains. This can be a gradual process. It's not like you'll get one friend and suddenly become fearless, but like I said, once the ball starts rolling it tends to keep going.

Getting that first bit of success and handling that first batch of rejections is the hardest

Like with working on other social issues, the trickiest part is often right at the beginning when you're trying to get those initial positive results. The first few times you purposefully stick your neck out and get rejected are the toughest. Those first few friends may be the hardest ones to make. After you're over the hump the rest of the way can be a lot smoother.

Try to adopt the healthy attitudes towards rejection

Above I listed many of the more productive, healthy views towards rejection. For the most part you'll start to develop them as you become more successful. However, sometimes just reading about an alternative attitude can help instill it in you. If that happens for you, great. However, don't try and force yourself to have a different mentality too much. Like I said, the majority of your attitude change will come as you have new experiences.

Facing your fear of rejection

Like with other types of fears, the best way to get past a fear of rejection is to face it and learn firsthand that you can handle it. [This article](#) and [this article](#) go into more detail. Put

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yourself in situations where there's a risk of rejection, starting with ones that feel easier and more manageable and working your way up. No one ever fully kills off their discomfort with getting rejected, but they can get much better at facing it.

When you confront your fear of rejection, by definition that means you're going to be getting rejected more. Farther down I talk about some approaches to feeling better after that happens. You'll need to use those strategies. You've got to get yourself used to being in situations where you risk rejection, but you've also got to be able to have a healthy, ultimately beneficial response to it when it happens. If you don't, and you still take a negative message from being turned down, all the additional rejections can just make you feel worse about yourself.

Your attitude towards being rejected can change once you purposefully start working on it

Some people might have read the point above and thought, "I've already been rejected a ton of times. I haven't gotten used to it. If anything, I hate it more now." What I've found is that there can be a big difference between when you have information about what you need to do, and you're deliberately and systematically working on an issue, compared to before when you had no idea and were more bumbling along as best you could.

In the past someone may have just tried to make friends, with no real plan behind it, and when they got rejected they were completely thrown for a loop. After reading more about social skills and how to face their fear of rejection, they could come in with a totally different approach. They'd know, "Okay, here's what I need to try and do. It's possible I may be rejected. That's okay. If it happens I'll do x,y,z. If not I'll do..." The whole exercise feels more like a detached project, and the outcome doesn't feel as much like a core reflection of their worthiness as a person.

Expect rejection and prepare for it ahead of time

Some people find they have less fear of rejection if they acknowledge it's a possibility going into a situation, and they have a plan in place to prepare for it. It's easier to ask someone if they want to hang out if you've already partially made peace with the fact that they may say no. Some readers may be thinking, "No, expecting rejection ahead of time is my whole problem. And anticipating it makes me feel worse, not more in control." This suggestion may not apply to everyone. Again, going back to the previous point, once some people start actively addressing their fear, and not working in a reactive, moment-to-moment way, their response to it may change.

Rejection often isn't as bad as you imagine it will be

Don't get me wrong, I totally realize some rejections are hard to take, and right below this point I give several suggestions for dealing with that. Sometimes though we'll dread a possible rejection ahead of time, but in the moment when it actually happens, it doesn't hit us as hard as we thought it would. Our response is more, "...Oh...oh, okay then. I guess they don't want to be friends", rather than, "Agh, this is horrible. I can't stand it!" You may also find your attitude toward the other person quickly morphs to an annoyed or indifferent one, instead of your feeling dejected; "Well, if they don't want to hang out with me, then I don't want to hang out with them."

Again, some readers may reply, "No, rejection is as bad as I imagine it is. And I've had it happen to me so many times that it's even worse now." This is another point that may not be the perfect fit for everyone. And again, the idea that your mentality may change if you start proactively tackling your rejection issues may apply here too.

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Ways to feel better following a tough rejection or mistake

In the long run rejection will start to affect you less. Plus, at any stage in the process there are going to be plenty of rejections that we get over very easily. Like if we ask a bunch of co-workers if they want to meet up for drinks in the evening, and four of them say they can't make it, we may not give it a second thought. Or we may not care if we unsuccessfully try to chat to two people at a party before we end up hitting it off with a third person.

However, if you're used to it or not, there are still times where a particular setback may hit us hard and we need to try and make ourselves feel better. Here are some suggestions:

Give yourself time to feel down about it

A lot of rejections won't affect you much, but if one does hit you harder that's okay. It's totally normal to sometimes feel down about this kind of thing. It doesn't help to try and force yourself to feel completely differently, or tell yourself you 'shouldn't' care as much as you do. If it bothers you, it bothers you. One day down the road you likely won't let it get to you as much, but for now it does. It goes without saying though that you don't want to dwell on the rejection for too long or let it totally paralyze you from doing other things. Depending on how much the rejection stings, give yourself anywhere from a few days to a few weeks to feel bummed out, then take more active steps to put it behind you.

If the rejection was fairly run-of-the-mill then you may just need a day or two to get it out of your system. With the exception of extreme traumas, our minds are good at getting things back to business as usual and not letting us feel the same emotion for too long. What you'll probably also find is that the more experience you have with rejection, the quicker you'll naturally recover from it. At first getting turned down may knock you out for a solid few days. With time you'll still feel it, but the worst of the emotions may pass in a day and half instead. You may even start to get over minor, routine rejections in minutes.

Use general approaches to making yourself feel better

This is standard advice. Allow yourself to feel bad for a bit right after the rejection, but after that start doing things that will help pick up your mood and remind you that you've got a lot of other good things going on in your life. Go do something really fun. Exercise. Talk to someone about how you feel and get it off your chest.

Watch how you think about and explain the rejection

This is an essential point. When you get rejected you don't want to create a takeaway message from it that reinforces feelings of helplessness and low self-esteem. Catching and challenging your self-critical, unrealistic thoughts can help prevent that. This isn't to contradict the earlier point. If you feel bad, that's okay, and this isn't about trying to force your thinking to be perfect so you won't feel a normal response. It's more about being on guard for thoughts that may make things even worse. [This article gives an overview of disputing negative thoughts.](#)

One thing you want to look for in particular is the explanation you give yourself for why the rejection happened. You may tend to blame it all on your supposed personal flaws and generalize the one setback to mean no one could ever like you and your social issues will never get better. You might also unquestionably assume people have a negative opinion of you.

Take the time to consider more innocuous explanations. First, question whether you even experienced a true rejection, or something that just felt like one. Maybe someone didn't answer a question of yours and you assumed it was because they were offended and hated

you, when they just couldn't think of an answer, or their mind momentarily went elsewhere. Some other examples:

- "She didn't want to talk to me because we just didn't have much in common. Oh well, can't hit it off with everyone. Maybe the next person will be different." vs. "She didn't want to talk to me because I'm so awkward. No one will ever like me."
- "He didn't invite me to the party because he didn't have my phone number" vs. "He didn't invite me to the party because he thinks I'm totally boring, which I am."
- "That conversation didn't go well because he was obviously distracted by the paper he has due tomorrow." vs. "That conversation didn't go well because people think I'm lame and I never can think of anything to say."
- "He didn't return my call because of a mix up. He thought I knew he was out of town this week." vs. "He didn't return my call because he hates me and is just making excuses."

Put the rejection in perspective

Sometimes it can also help to take a step back and think about how important the rejection really was in the grand scheme of things. Right in the aftermath of being rejected someone's thoughts may be a bit overblown and they'll think things like, "That was my only chance to make friends. Now that they've turned me down I'll be alone all year" or "They seemed like they'd be the perfect friend for me. My social life will never be the same without them." If they think more realistically and put things in perspective they may realize the classmate who didn't want to be friends with them was just one prospect of dozens, or that they actually didn't have that much in common with the person who turned down their invitation. The rejections were hardly 'make or break' for their social lives. Don't go too far and totally trash the people who rejected you. Just think about the impact of their rejection in more balanced terms.

Keep pursuing other prospects

Rejection is a lot harder to take if you thought you blew the one good chance you had going on at the moment. Ideally at the time you got rejected you were also pursuing other social opportunities. Just knowing that can take a lot of the rejection's impact away. If not, then take steps to cultivate some new prospects. Send your mind the message that the recent rejection was just a hiccup, and that you've got a lot of things coming down the pipeline that may turn out better.

Re-frame the rejection and see what value you can get from it

This isn't to say that if you look for a silver lining in a rejection that it will instantly cut off any negative emotions you're experiencing, but it can provide some relief. Think about what learning opportunities and lessons the rejection provided. Maybe the pain you're going through now will give you information that will help you avoid further mistakes down the road. If you can figure out a gaffe you made, it can also take some of the sting away because you can tell yourself it was a correctable error that caused the rejection, not your core personality.

There are tons of examples I could come up with. One might be someone who got the cold shoulder at a party from a group of people they tried to talk to. In hindsight they may have realized the group was giving clear signs that they were having a private, personal conversation, and that they barged in and tried to argue with everyone about politics. A different kind of example may be a guy who unsuccessfully tried to make friends with two

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co-workers. After thinking about it more, he may decide that he didn't really have anything in common with them, and just automatically felt they should try and be buddies because they seemed popular with everyone else in the office.

Give yourself credit for trying, and having the guts to take a risk

You're actively working on your issues. You're making progress. You were able to take a chance and put yourself out there. Not everyone is able to do that. Maybe that sounds a bit schmaltzy and 'Rah Rah Rah!', but I think it is important and not an accomplishment you should just brush off.

Try to get outside feedback if you keep getting rejected and you don't know why

Some people feel like they're constantly being rejected, even when they try and correct their mistakes, and they can't put a finger on why. I think if something like this has been happening to you it's best to seek some outside advice. You may have some blind spots that you need someone else to point out. It's best to ask someone who can observe you in person, rather than putting a "I don't know what I'm doing wrong" post up on a message board, where the other forum members won't have much more information to go on than you do. If you have a friend or family member you feel you can ask, you can go them. Not everyone is comfortable giving people potentially hurtful feedback though. It could also be useful to hear the thoughts of a professional counselor.